

Sexual Violence Against Children in Sports and Exercise: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Sexual violence against children in sports receives little research attention. The aim of this Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses-based systematic literature review was to synthesize the up-to-date knowledge and identify the already *known* and the still *unknown* information in this area. The literature search yielded seven eligible studies for inclusion. Their key outcomes suggest that sexual violence against children in sports is prevalent. Girls are more often the victims than boys, but gender appears to mediate the disclosure. Minority groups are at higher risk for sexual violence, and athletes at higher levels of competition seem to be more vulnerable for grooming. While the coach is often seen as the perpetrator, new research suggests that peer-athletes may precede the coach. Disclosure is a problem, due to personal and interpersonal concerns, which deters scholastic research in this area. In the final section of the review, a “what we know” and “what we need to know” list of highlights is offered as the concluding summary of the review. These factual points could raise the awareness of parents and/or guardians about the vulnerability of their children to sexual abuse if they are involved in sports. They could also attract the attention of the policy makers to the urgent need of developing and implementing preventive measures to make sports and exercise environments pleasurable and safe for children.

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Childhood sexual abuse is a significant risk factor for a range of psychological symptoms in the general population (Briere & Elliott, 2003). Depression, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, sexual disorders, and suicidal ideation and attempts are all associated with childhood sexual abuse (Briere & Elliott, 2003; Hartill, 2010). In a meta-analysis of 217 publications, including nearly 10 million participants, the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse worldwide was found to be 18% for girls and 8% for boys (Stoltenborgh, Van Ijzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011). According to Tschan (2013), sport is an ideal environment for sexual abuse

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since it is seen as a “sacred” part of the culture and consequently suspends social norms and, therefore, accepts behavior that is normally unacceptable (East, 2012, p.21), where the coach is able to touch children as part of their work while enjoying the trust of the parents (Tschan, 2013, p.81). This generally accepted physical contact initiated by the coach may generate a gray area between proper and abusive behavior, which may be responsible for limited disclosure and, thus, a lower estimated prevalence of sexual violence against children in sports (2–8%; Parent & Hlimi, 2012) than in the general population (8–18%; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). The extensive time shared by the coach and the young athlete (that is often more than the time spent with the parents) and the longitudinal-developmental aspect of the sports-training situations may render children in sport especially vulnerable to sexual abuse.

There are several theories about child sexual abuse that also can explain the behavior in sport situations. One general model is the *integrated theory of sexual offending* proposed by Marshall and Barbaree (1990), which suggests that a person’s vulnerability to engage in deviant sexual behaviors is driven by the interaction of developmental and situational factors. Another more specific theory is the *four-factor model*, which includes emotional congruence, sexual arousal, blockage, and disinhibition (Finkelhor, 1999); there are four preconditions that are necessary for the sexual abuse to occur: (1) motivation, (2) internal inhibition, (3) external inhibition, and (4) resistance. Further, another four-factor model is the *quadripartite model of child sexual abuse* (Hall & Hirschman, 1992), including four motivational components that either work independently or in combination; these are (1) physiological sexual arousal, (2) cognitive motivation, (3) affective dysfunction, and (4) personality problems. While it is beyond the scope of the current review to elaborate on these theories, they all could account for sexual abuse of children in general and in sport environments as well. However, the few reports that were published in the field of sports did not test these theories; their results – as it will emerge throughout the review – could be most closely interpreted in light of a general framework, like the integrated theory of sexual offending.

Nearly three decades ago, interest in sexual harassment and abuse within sports gained research momentum after realizing that such violence is prevalent in this area (Brackenridge & Kirby, 1997; Lenskyj, 1992). Brackenridge and Fasting (2005) defined sexual harassment as “unwanted attention on the basis of sex” (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005, p.35), another definition was used by the International Olympic Committee as “any unwanted or unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature, whether verbal, non-verbal or physical” (Mountjoy et al., 2016, p.3). Sexual abuse was defined as groomed and/or coercing collaboration in sexual acts where the victim has been trapped by the perpetrator (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005, p.35). Another similar definition was provided by Mountjoy et al. (2016): “Any conduct of a sexual nature, whether non-contact, contact or penetrative, where consent is coerced/manipulated or is not or cannot be given” (p.3). Research indicates that sexual harassment and sexual abuse are major problems in sport that

need to be tackled through means of prevention and athlete education (Alexander, Stafford, & Lewis, 2011; Brackenridge, 2001; Brackenridge & Rhind, 2014; Parent & Demers, 2011). The bulk of research on sexual harassment and abuse in sports has focused on the coach–athlete relationship (Brake, 2011; Johansson, Kenttä, & Andersen, 2016; Sellers, 2012), especially in female athletes (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005; Fasting, Brackenridge, & Knorre, 2010; Fasting, Brackenridge, & Sundgot-Borgen, 2003, 2004). However, studies in the new millennium have started to show interest in male athletes too (Hartill, 2005, 2009, 2014; Parent & Bannon, 2012). Some research with adult athletes also included children and/or adolescents (Brackenridge, 1998; Fasting, Brackenridge, & Walseth, 2002; Hartill, 2009; Parent & Bannon, 2012), but the focus was on gender, rather than on the children as a susceptible group. Hartill (2005) proposed that if sport is to attempt to safeguard all children from sexual abuse, research must reflect the highly complex nature of child sexual abuse, including the experience of male children. Authors in the field have noted a marked absence of empirical data on the prevalence and incidence of violence against children in sport and on prevention strategies addressing the problem (Brackenridge, Fasting, Kirby, & Leahy, 2010).

Only few quantitative studies have explored the incidence of sexual violence against children in sports; they relied on small samples from elite sports (McPherson et al., 2016). One exception is a large-scale *retrospective* study with over 6,000 undergraduates aged 18–22 years, which revealed that 29% of the respondents experienced sexual abuse when they were child athletes (Alexander et al., 2011). This figure is much higher than that reported for the general child population (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). Except this figure, knowledge about children as victims of sexual violence in sports is scarce, which also seems to be the case when it comes to the profile of the perpetrators. Alexander et al. (2011) found that teammates, or peer athletes, are often the perpetrators at the lower levels of competition while coaches are more frequently perpetrators at higher levels of competition. The profile of the perpetrator of sexual harassment also seems to differ in various sports (Alexander et al., 2011). An investigation that analyzed 323 cases of sexual violence in sport found that 77% of the perpetrators were male coaches aged 31–50 years (Vertommen, Schipper-Van Veldhoven, Hartill, & Van Den Eede, 2015). However, a content analysis of 159 cases of sexual violence in sports, reported in the print media, found that 98% of the time the perpetrators were coaches, teachers, or instructors aged 16–63 years (Brackenridge, Bishop, Moussali, & Tapp, 2008). It is suspected that peer-athletes may also often be perpetrators of sexual violence (Mountjoy et al., 2016). While most perpetrators are men, women may also commit sexual abuse (Brackenridge et al., 2010).

Perpetrators, independent of gender, seem to prepare their victims for the sexual act by grooming, which does not necessarily include a sexual assault, but it leads to it, if the abusers succeed with their intentions (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005). Grooming consists of four stages: (1) targeting the victim, (2) building trust, (3)

developing isolation, and (4) initiation of the sexual abuse and securing secrecy (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005). The secrecy and the subjectively appraised consequences of its breach reduce disclosure to only a fraction of the actual cases. Hartill (2009) suggests that there are four barriers to reporting sexual abuse in organized sport, which are as follows: (1) lack of procedures for reporting sexual abuse; (2) abuse viewed as the problem of the individual member, not the institution; (3) the closed nature of institutions; and (4) the belief system surrounding institutions.

Since new cases constantly emerge in the mass media, and no previous reviews were available at the time of writing, we performed this systematic review to summarize the current knowledge about this sensitive issue in the field of sports. The blending of the results from the few extant studies may not only shed more light on the current status of knowledge, but also shape future research directions and attract the attention and motivation of the policy makers to work on the means of prevention making sports a better and safer place for children.

Method

The review was prepared in accord with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement (Liberati et al., 2009). Potential articles were identified by searching electronic databases up to the end of April 2017. The following resources were searched four times: PsycNET, Google Scholar, and EBSCO SPORTDiscus. The search terms used in the four consecutive searches are shown in Table 1.

Inclusion criteria included study population, outcome, design, and publication type (Table 2). Due to limited research in this area, inclusion criteria were broad. Both qualitative and quantitative studies were included with no sample size restriction. Retrospective research were also included if the incident took place before the participants turned 18 years old. The exclusion criteria included articles that did not examine particularly children under 18 years, or did not have separate analysis between participants under 18 years and

Table 1. The search terms used in the identification of articles to be included in the review.

The following search terms were used in each database-search during the *first overall and second period-limited* search:

sexual AND (abus* OR harass* OR exploit*) AND (child* OR adolescent* OR teen* OR young* OR youth) AND (sport* OR athlet*) AND (coach* OR trainer*)

The following search terms were used in each database-search during the *third, no period-limited* search:

sexual AND (abus* OR harass* OR exploit*) AND (child* OR adolescent* OR teen* OR young* OR youth) AND (sport* OR athlet* OR physical activity) AND (coach* OR trainer* OR teacher*)

The following search term were used in each database-search during the *fourth, final, and no-period-limited* search:

sexual AND (abus* OR harass* OR exploit*) AND (child* OR adolescent* OR teen* OR young* OR youth) AND (sport* OR athlet* OR physical activity)

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria of the articles included in the review.

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
	Population
Children and adolescents under 18 years who have experienced sexual violence inside sports	Studies with both children and/or adolescents and adult participants, with no separate analysis of them as subgroups
Adults who have experienced sexual violence in sport before they were 18 years old	Studies about only psychological or physical violence Experienced sexual violence in other areas than sports
	Outcome
Experiences of sexual violence as a child within sports	
	Design
Empirical studies	Systematic review
Original research	Meta-analysis
	Publication
Articles	Abstracts, books
Time span until April 2017	Systematic reviews and meta-analysis Published in a languages other than English or Norwegian

above 18 years; reports not addressing specifically sports, exercise, or physical activity; articles not separating sexual abuse from other types of abuse; articles that did not report empirical research; the type of publication was only an abstract, book, book-chapter, literature review, or meta-analysis; the publication was not English, or Norwegian. The screening of the title and abstract used the same inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 2). The PRISMA Flow Diagram is presented in Figure 1 to summarize the selection and screening process. Studies located in each database-search were transferred to EndNote to allow the removal of duplicates.

Quality assessment and risk of publication bias

In this review, we used the Mixed Method Appraisal Tool (MMAT-version 2011) that was developed for the quality appraisal of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods reviews (Pace et al., 2012; Pluye, 2015). It consists of a form that answers questions on problem areas, validity, selection, and methodology. Its intra-class correlation is 0.8 and it appears to be highly reliable (Pace et al., 2010) and both practical and efficient for the quality assessment of mixed methods reviews (Queiroga et al., 2015). Each study type is judged separately within its own methodological domain. Four criteria are used in assessing the quality of qualitative and quantitative studies, and three criteria are used for mixed methods studies, plus the one for either qualitative or quantitative method. All items are rated as “yes”, “no” or “can’t tell”, with one point awarded for each ‘yes’ response. Scores range from 25% to 100%.

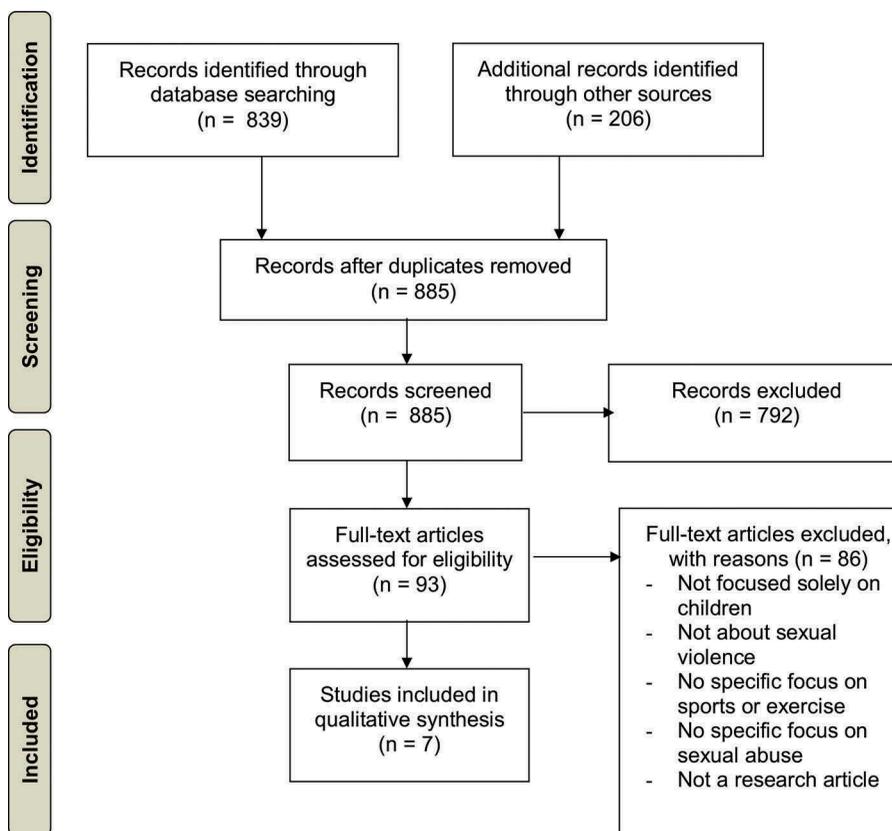


Figure 1. PRISMA 2009 Flow Diagram (Liberati et al., 2009), indicating the selection and inclusion of the reports in the current systematic literature review.

Publication bias also needs to be assessed, since studies reporting positive results are given preference (Wright, Brand, Dunn, & Spindler, 2007), yet unpublished studies may also contain data that could affect the conclusions of a systematic review (Wright et al., 2007). In this work, the publication bias was partially addressed by contacting two lead authors in the field and asking them if they had any relevant papers for the systematic review. The English-language bias is an acknowledged general risk of bias (Wright et al., 2007). This dilemma was marginally addressed by also including Norwegian studies in the eligibility criteria.

Results and discussion

Based on the eligibility criteria, seven articles could be included in this review. They differ in their primary topics: prevalence of sexual and interpersonal violence, profile of the perpetrators, analysis of court reports, interpersonal relations between coaches and athletes, perception of acceptable coach behavior, boyhood sexual subjection in male sport, and narrative of sexual harassment. The seven articles were from six different nations:

Canada, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and the United Kingdom. The research methods used were questionnaire studies (4), narratives (2), and content analysis of court reports (1). The years of publication were relatively recent, ranging from 2013 to 2017, with one exception from 2001 (Table 3). The results of the assessment of the risks of bias are shown in Figure 2.

Prevalence of sexual violence

Only one work examined the prevalence of child sexual violence in sports in a retrospective web-based study (Vertommen et al., 2016). The study reported a prevalence of 14% of sexual violence, which included both sexual harassment and abuse. The retrospective data-collection is a known limitation in this work, but due to the sensitive nature of the issue, this method may often be the only choice to scholars. Due to limited on time disclosure, the method may be the only way to estimate the prevalence of sexual abuse of children in sports, which, nevertheless, may be biased by the type of sport and cultural heterogeneity. Therefore, using a retrospective method to evaluate the incidence of sexual violence against children in sport may be accepted from an applied-, rather than scientific, perspective. The former, however, lends weight to the consideration of this serious and highly prevalent (14% means that more than 1/7 children in sports are affected!) issue in the lives of young athletes and, thus, can move those in charge to implement measures that could reduce, or eliminate, children's abuse in sports. Based on the limited current evidence and known barriers to disclosure (discussed later), we assume that the prevalence of sexual violence against children in sport is very high and there is variability across different social- and geographical-, as well as sport-settings.

Gender of the victim

Girls seem to be more often the victims of sexual violence in sports than boys. For example, Fasting, Brackenridge, and Kjølberg (2013) found that in 14 Norwegian court reports of 29 victims, only 1 case involved 2 boys and 27 were female victims. Vertommen et al. (2016) reported that 17.2% of the females have experienced sexual violence in organized sport when they were children, while this figure was 10.2% for boys. These findings suggest a gender difference regarding sexual violence, but scholars think that incidents of sexual violence by male victims may be underreported (Vertommen et al., 2016), or perceived as nonviolent. Indeed, Hartill (2014) reported the cases of two male victims of sexual in which the author used the term "sexual subjection" instead of sexual abuse, or violence, to let the victims choose own definitions to their experiences and to avoid the suggestion of trauma

Table 3. Summary of the studies included in the current systematic review on sexual violence against children in sport.

Author, year, country of origin	Design	Aims	Participants	Inclusion criteria	Findings
Vertommen et al., 2017, the Netherlands and Belgium	Retrospective online study with a convenience sample.	To report the perpetrators' characteristics based on a large-scale prevalence study focused on violence against children in sport in the Netherlands and Belgium.	A sample of 4,043 adults (same subjects as in Vertommen et al., 2016).	Participants experiencing sexual violence (from Vertommen et al. (2016)) were asked further questions concerning the perpetrators characteristics.	Regardless of gender, 56% had more than one perpetrator; 76% were abused by male perpetrator and 15% by both genders. Equal gender distribution was noted for male and female victims. In all types of interpersonal violence in sport, the perpetrators are mainly male peer athletes who often act jointly in groups. Usually, physical violence perpetrated by coaches tends to be less severe in contrast to other perpetrators, but acts of sexual violence by coaches are more severe.
Parent et al., 2016, Canada	Questionnaire-based one-stage stratified cluster sampling of 34 high schools in the Province of Quebec, Canada.	1) To study the rate of sexual violence by coaches in organized sports and the rate of consensual sex with a coach by the sexually active adolescents.	Adolescents aged between 14 and 17 years (N = 6,450).	High school students	Total of 0.5% of the sample reported sexual abuse involving a coach. From among all the adolescents who experienced sexual abuse in their lifetime (10.2%), 5.3% were the victims of sexual abuse by a coach. In the past 12 months preceding the study, 0.4% of the participants experienced sexual harassment from a coach and 1.2% had consensual sexual with a coach.

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Author, year, country of origin	Design	Aims	Participants	Inclusion criteria	Findings
Vertommen et al., 2016, the Netherlands and Belgium	Retrospective online study with a convenience sample.	1) To assess the prevalence of interpersonal violence against children in sport in the Netherlands and Belgium.	Adults aged 18–50 years prescreened for organized sport participation before the age of 18 years (N = 4,043)	Experienced psychological, physical, and/or sexual violence in youth sport.	Prevalence of sexual violence in the overall sample was 14%, with 16.7% in Flanders and 11.9% in the Netherlands. Among the genders, 17.2% of the females reported sexual violence and 10.2% of the males. No difference in sexual violence was noted between age groups. Prevalence of sexual violence was found between the four age groups, but it was higher for the minority groups of homosexuals, bisexuals, ethnic minorities, and disabled athletes.
Fasting & Sand, 2015, Norway	Semi-structured interviews in a study on gender-relations in the lives of European female sport students.	To investigate females' attitudes and experiences of sexual harassment.	From among sport and physical education students (N = 193), 9 were interviewed; 2 narratives chosen for the report.	Had experienced verbal abuse and unwanted body contact, or been ridiculed by their coach.	Both narratives revealed grooming by the coach. One respondent did not recognize that she was groomed before the interview and that the coach used his position to come on to her. She had never confronted the coach. The other actively tried to avoid the coach's approach and told her teammates that she did not like the way the coach behaves with her; they helped her to get away from him. She never confronted the coach and did not disclose the story to parents.

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Author, year, country of origin	Design	Aims	Participants	Inclusion criteria	Findings
Hartill, 2014, Great Britain	Case studies through open-ended interview (e-mail, personal, or both).	To understand men's experiences in sexual violence in sport.	Two male participants; one identified through public disclosure, the other through voluntary contact.	Adult male participants who were involved in sexual act with an adult within the context of sports.	Two narratives of boyhood sexual subjection in sports. One, victim of his coach at age of 11. He felt shame and guilt due to the positive feelings from the sexual experience, which made him feel like a complicit and, therefore, never disclosed his story to anyone. The other participant's perpetrator was an assistant coach who comforted him when he was bullied by his mates at school; the relationship was perceived as pleasurable and safe by the victim, who now recognized it as an abusive relationship while it was happening, but did not disclose to anyone, because he was afraid from being labeled as homosexual.
Fasting et al., 2013, Norway	Content analysis of Court reports at the Norwegian Lovdata (Law data) website. Reports from 1956 to 2007 were examined.	To investigate (1) what court reports reveal about perpetrators and their abuse strategies, and (2) how useful is the content analysis of court reports for gaining more knowledge about sexual violence in sport.	14 court cases; 29 victims; 22 girls and 7 boys. The age of the victims ranged between 6 and 17 years.	Sexual violence in sport against children and adolescents under 18 years of age that ended up in court.	All perpetrators were males. The abusers' age ranged from 19 to 58 years at first abuse case; with eight of them aged between 25 and 40 years. Duration from 1 to 6 years, with average 1.8 years. Six of the perpetrators were married, one was divorced and two were not married. Jobs ranged from head physician to blue collar workers. No clear profile of a perpetrator emerged. In eight of the cases, the victims were selected by their perpetrator. Athletes in individual sport seemed to be at higher risk for sexual abuse.

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Author, year, country of origin	Design	Aims	Participants	Inclusion criteria	Findings
Nielsen, 2001, Denmark	Retrospective questionnaire study with a student sample of athletes, followed-up with interviews.	To study the relationships between coaches and athletes, and to determine if there is a fine line between acceptable and unacceptable coach behavior and to elucidate on the processes and forms of behavior that may lead to sexual abuse.	Student sample of athletes under 18 years of age (<i>N</i> = 253; 63% males).	Sport career experience before they turned 18 years old.	Instruction-related behavior was perceived as sexual harassment by under 6% of the students. Around 90% had experienced it themselves. Indirect instruction-related behavior was perceived as sexual harassment by 10%, where 75% reported this as something that could interfere with their ability to compete. Around 40% had experienced it themselves. Sexist comments were perceived as sexual harassment by 25–31.4%. Experiences with it varied between 48.2% and 62.9% depending on the type of comment. Noninstructional, potentially threatening, comments were perceived as sexual harassment by more than 50% of the respondents. 10% of the athletes had been asked out by their coach and 37% had experienced being called by a pet name. Verbal or physical advances by a coach were perceived as sexual harassment by 85.7–98.6%, depending of the character of the advance. 49% of the boys had experienced a coach staring at their private parts, while 25% of the girls had the same experience, 3.4% of the females had been proposed a sexual encounter, while 1.2% of the boys had the same.

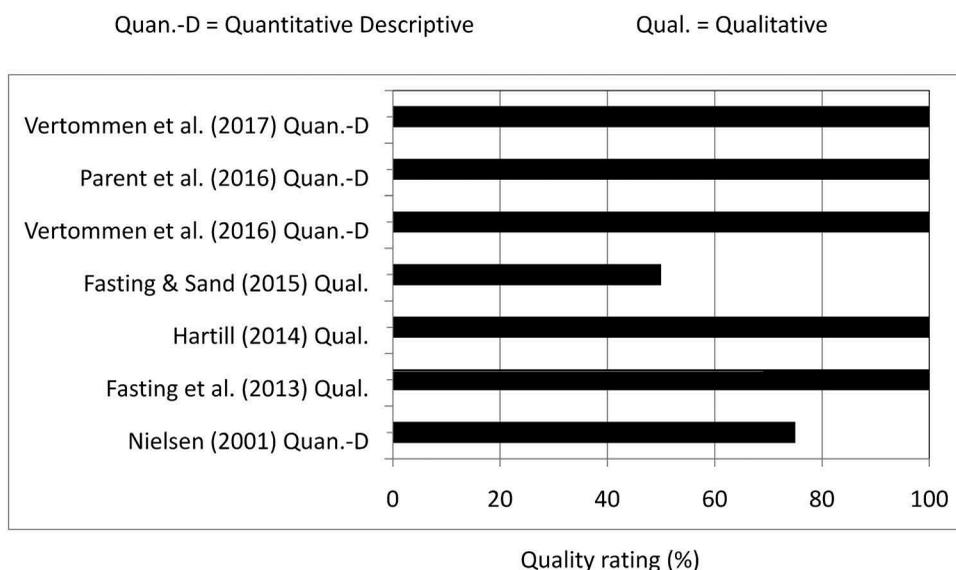


Figure 2. The results of the assessment of the risk of bias in the seven studies included in the current systematic review.

through the negative connotation of “abuse” (Hartill, 2014). The limited number of scholastic reports suggest that girls are more often the victims of sexual violence in sports, but within sports, the level of competition, type of sport, and social entourages may affect who the victims are. We suggest that sexual violence against children across sports may be equally present in girls and boys, but the latter may have different perspectives on both the act of violence itself and the disclosure of the events. Such a conjecture warrants focused and systematic investigation in future studies.

Level of competition

From one quantitative and two qualitative studies it emerges that performance level of the athlete is associated with sexual violence. Vertommen et al. (2016) reported a higher prevalence of sexual violence for elite athletes than others. Further, three of the qualitative studies showed that children who worked hard to become better athletes and put a lot of effort into their participation were more prone to sexual violence than the others (Fasting & Sand, 2015; Hartill, 2014). The three narratives mirror a determinism and a need for approval from authority figures in athletes’ close proximity. Two boys said that they did not prioritize school to keep focus on their sport (Hartill, 2014). One of them said that he could “prosper at sport” (Hartill, 2014, p. 29) and a girl recounted that her coach had high demands, so she “did almost everything to be selected for the first team” (Fasting & Sand, 2015, p. 580). Another boy wanted to make his mom proud and “All I did was eat, sleep, school and skate. I didn’t apply myself at school—I had to

skate—I had to conquer myself and be a success with this—I put everything into it” (Hartill, 2014, p. 31). Performing at higher levels demands dedication and sacrifices from the athletes, but performing at higher levels also appears to parallel a higher predisposition to sexual violence. We presume that the explanation behind the level of sport as a risk factor in sexual violence against children in sports may be related to longer time (and expanded grooming) the athlete spends with the coach, and also to the close proximity in time and space between the two. This explanation is in accord with the integrated theory of sexual offending (Marshall & Barbaree, 1990).

Risk factors

Only one article focused on risk factors for sexual violence, but due to the importance of the issue, we need to address it here. In the study by Vertommen et al. (2016), incidences of the reported sexual violence cases were higher in the minority groups than other groups. The groups more often affected were homosexuals, bisexuals, ethnic minorities, and disabled athletes. A regression analysis confirmed that belonging to one of these groups is a significant predictor of sexual violence (Vertommen et al., 2016). We presume that this observation may be linked to a lower voice of the victims who may feel inferior to the nonminority perpetrators, who in turn may think that their word is stronger than that of the victim if the acts of violence comes to the surface. This view may motivate them to select victims from the less influential groups, whose members may indeed enjoy lesser credibility in social and justice institutions that vary with cultural, local social, and political environments.

The coach as the perpetrator

The coach was found as the perpetrator in six of the seven studies. This athlete–coach proximity warrants the careful consideration of this issue. Nielsen (2001) reported that both genders experienced an equal 48% of sexist comments from a coach. About 70% of the boys and half of the girls were exposed to sexist jokes from the coach. Half of the boys and 25% of the girls have noted that a coach stared at their private parts (Nielsen, 2001). While males were not kissed by a coach, 8% of the females were. Three times more girls (3%) than boys (1%) have admitted receiving a sexual proposal from the coach (Nielsen, 2001). However, in another study, the opposite figures have emerged with respect to sexual violence (Parent, Lavoie, Thibodeau, Hébert, & Blais, 2016). For example, in the last 12 months preceding the inquiry, three times more boys were exposed to sexual violence than girls, and life-time exposure was also nearly twice as high in boys than in girls, but in spite of the apparent differences, gender differences in abuse could not be established. In another study (Vertommen et al., 2017), 19% of the respondents

told that the perpetrator was a coach, usually an older-age, or much older coach. The study also reported a heightened severity of the sexual violence when a coach was the perpetrator.

In the reviewed qualitative studies, the perpetrators were male coaches, who were significantly older than the victims (Fasting & Sand, 2015; Hartill, 2014). Inspection of court reports also showed that in 11/14 cases, the perpetrator was a coach (Fasting et al., 2013). To generate a clearer picture of the perpetrators, we need to look at their general characteristics.

Characteristics of the perpetrator

The extant literature suggests that men are more often the perpetrators of acts of sexual violence against children in sports than women. All victims in the reviewed qualitative studies had a male coach as the perpetrator (Fasting & Sand, 2015; Hartill, 2014). In the online study by Vertommen et al. (2017), 56% of the sample reported having more than one perpetrator. In 76% of the cases, the perpetrator was male and 15% of the respondents reported having both genders as perpetrators. Over half of the reported perpetrators were “known persons” other than fellow athletes or coaches (i.e., medical staff, board members, sports personnel, etc.); 45% reported fellow athletes as the perpetrator, while 19% reported the coach. Regardless of their roles, the majority of perpetrators were men. It should be highlighted that in this recent investigation, fellow athletes represented the most prevalent group of perpetrators. The authors created perpetrator profiles based on the number of perpetrator, gender of the perpetrator, and his or her position. Trying to narrow the number of profiles, there were only single or several perpetrators, and the role was either athlete, coach, or other. For sexual violence, the most common profiles were “several male others” for males with 19.6% and “one male other” for the females, with 20.6% (Vertommen et al., 2017). It should be stressed that these figures are based on the victims’ subjective retrospective accounts in an online inquiry, the collected information was mainly descriptive and do not provide any in-depth knowledge, which may be useful to generate a more complete image of the perpetrators, and the characteristics are about alleged perpetrators, not convicted ones, which was mentioned as a limitation by the authors (Vertommen et al., 2017). Nevertheless, a few characteristics of the perpetrators do seem to emerge from the reviewed studies. Perpetrators have power and influence over their victims, they are mostly males (Fasting et al., 2013), and in spite of the popular belief that the coach is most often the perpetrator, it emerges that fellow athletes may be the most prevalent group of perpetrators (Vertommen et al., 2017). Future studies, should keep these findings in perspective when they examine the sexual violence of children in sports in empirical research.

Grooming

The process of grooming is a key component of sexual violence against children in sports and embeds contextual complexity that makes sexual violence difficult to recognize, both for the victims and their surroundings. In one case, the grooming started with the coach giving a ride to the athlete to and from the sport training venue. The victim did not think that anything was wrong with that (Fasting & Sand, 2015). One male victim described being punished if playing bad and wanting the coach's praise, by becoming a part of the elite who was let in the coach's room (Hartill, 2014). Another male victim described a relationship with an assistant coach, who comforted him after being bullied by a player. Furthermore, he saw his relationship with the coach as mutual, where they met each other's needs and that he had never felt used. Concerning the sexual experience, he did not see it as "horrible" and felt that he was always comfortable with it at the time (Hartill, 2014). This case clearly illustrates the developmental and situational interaction put forward by the integrated theory of sexual offending (Marshall & Barbaree, 1990).

Surprisingly, only in case study was the victim uncomfortable with the coach's closer than appreciated behavior (Fasting & Sand, 2015). It started with the coach giving a ride to the female athlete to practice; then he gave her driving lessons, and later he came home to her parent's house to fix their computer. It was at this point she had felt that the relationship was not as it was supposed to be. Although she found his behavior uncomfortable, she did not stop catching a ride with him to and from practice. She had told the fellow players that she did not like him and they helped her getting some distance from him in various ways.

A qualitative approach is the best method in examining the process of grooming; they shed light on how it is done in different ways, by pressuring the athlete to perform good, punish them if not, then reward them with gratification with themselves. It is a psychological game put forward of the perpetrator to make the victims believe that they want it themselves as well, which makes it hard for the victims to come out in public and disclose the experience. Future studies need to focus on how perpetrators select their candidates for grooming and try to identify the signs and differences between intentional grooming (with preplanned sexual purpose) and incidental acts of sexual violence generated by an opportunity, or a favorable situation, after simply caring for an athlete. The background, personality, and/or behavior of the athlete in the later situation also needs better understanding with a view on potential measures of defense and prevention.

Disclosure

Revealing being a victim of sexual violence seems to be challenging for the person who has experienced abuse. All case studies explore the disclosure of the experiences (Fasting & Sand, 2015; Hartill, 2014). One girl told her teammates the way she felt about the coach's behavior (Fasting & Sand,

2015). Others have never told their parents, or teammates, neither have they confronted the coach (Fasting & Sand, 2015; Hartill, 2014). For one, disclosing the relationship would have meant embarrassment, because the perpetrator was much older, and she did not realize at that time that it was wrong (Fasting & Sand, 2015). Another girl said that she never discussed her issues with the club, even though she was in the board; “Cause it was kind of I can handle this myself. I’m a strong person, this is not a problem” (Fasting & Sand, 2015, p.582). For a male victim, the disclosure of the story would have led to questions surrounding his sexuality and he did not want that. However, he did not feel that he was hurt by the coach, instead he felt safe, and was worried that by telling someone, it could ruin the relationship (Hartill, 2014). Still another victim talked about guilt in relation to disclosure. He mentioned several times that the feeling of pleasure during the abuse made him feel guilty; “You see—guilt! I was complicit” (Hartill, 2014, p.32). He told that he felt like encouraging the abuser and, therefore, it was his fault. This feeling, made him keep quiet even though the abuser never had never told him to keep still. The man said that his motivation for speaking up about the abuse for a study was to open the door for others to tell about their experiences, because “silence assists abusers. It’s one of the things they require, they need silence” (Hartill, 2014, p.32). Disclosing sexual violence seems to be very difficult for child athletes for different reasons, including the appraisal of right or wrong doing, fear of consequences, guilt or shame, and effects on the sporting career. Research could help the policy makers in identifying means by which the fear of disclosure can be nullified to help victims in time.

Limitations

The main limitation of this review is that it is based on a low number of studies due to lack of specific (and difficult to perform) research in the field. Another limitation is the retrospective nature of the information (no other means are available). The heterogeneity of the few studies makes generalizability and the conclusions relatively tentative.

Conclusions

The main conclusions of the current review are presented in highlights-format below. The practical implication of these highlights is that sexual abuse of children in sports is a great problem that needs to be addressed now, with a view on prevention, by managers and policy makers. Child athletes should be prepared for the eventuality of sexual abuse and taught the means of defense, including early recognition of the signs and their disclosure to caretakers (see Bates & Army, 2015).

What we know now about sexual violence of children in sports

- (1) The prevalence of explicit or implicit sexual violence against children in sports is high.
- (2) While girls appear to suffer more sexual violence in sports, both genders are affected.
- (3) Athletes at higher levels of competition are at greater risk for sexual abuse by a coach.
- (4) Children from the minority groups are at a greater risk for sexual violence than others.
- (5) While it was thought that coaches are the prime perpetrators of sexual violence against children in sport, fellow athletes may be more often perpetrators than coaches.
- (6) Grooming is a key component of sexual violence against children in sport and exercise.
- (7) Disclosure of sexual violence is prevented by fear of consequences and dubious subjective appraisal of the situation by the affected children.

What further knowledge we need about sexual violence of children in sports

- (1) How the prevalence rate of sexual violence against children varies across various sports, age-spans, cultures, and geopolitical subcultures?
- (2) What are the similarities and differences in sexual violence against girls and boys in sport, and how are they influenced by socioeconomics, cultural, and sport factors?
- (3) What factors render athletes at higher levels of competition to become victims of sexual abuse by the coach?
- (4) What are the personal and situational characteristics that render children from the minority groups more vulnerable to sexual violence in sports than others?
- (5) How does the sexual violence against fellow athletes unfold in team and individual sports? What are its determinants?
- (6) How can young athletes or their parents/caregivers recognize grooming? Under what circumstances is sincere caring for the athlete confused with grooming for sexual act?
- (7) What specific club-level, or local, and social-political measures could facilitate and even stimulate the disclosure of sexual violence against children in sports?

Disclosure statement

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